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Music review

John **Cunningham**

Musica Britannica 100

1.5 **Thomas Arne, *Judith***, ed. S. McVeigh and P. Lynan,
Musica Britannica 100 (London: Stainer & Bell, 2016), £130

1.10 Reaching 100 volumes in an editorial series is something
to be lauded. Founded in 1951, Musica Britannica has
become equally synonymous with celebrating neglected
British music and with excellence in scholarship and edi-
torial musicology. The volume chosen for this landmark
occasion is no exception. Arne's *Judith* is arguably one of
the composer's finest achievements, but has been unde-
servedly neglected since the late 18th century—caught
1.15 (as were so many other works) in the long shadow cast
by Handel.

1.20 Thomas Augustine Arne (1710–78) is today perhaps
best remembered for the rousingly patriotic song 'Rule
Britannia' from *Alfred* (traditionally given at the Last
Night of the Proms) as well as his exquisite settings of
Shakespearean songs from the early 1740s. Arne was a
man of the theatre; his Catholicism barred him from
obtaining a potentially lucrative court or chapel post. His
1.25 first major success on the London stage came with the
opera *Rosamond* (1733); indeed, Arne led the charge for
the revival of English opera. His fortunes over the next
few decades were subject to the usual vicissitudes, but by
the 1760s he was enjoying an upturn, both professionally
1.30 and creatively. Arne was the first English composer to
engage with the possibilities of all-sung comic opera; his
earliest attempts, beginning with *The Temple of Dullness*
(1745), met with failure, but he was finally rewarded in the
highly popular and influential *Thomas and Sally* (1760)—
1.35 in which he was also the first English composer to use the
clarinet. *Artaxerxes* followed in 1762, the first attempt at
an *opera seria* in English; it was frequently revived into
the 1830s. The same year saw *Love in a Village*, which
rejuvenated the ballad opera and influenced the growing
1.40 trend for pastiche opera.

Between these innovative works Arne turned to the
genre of oratorio, for the Lenten season of 1761. *Judith*
was in fact his second oratorio proper. His first, *The Death*
of Abel, appears to have been first performed in Dublin
1.45 in 1744, with a revival in London in 1755; however, much
of the music is lost. (*Alfred*, first performed at Cliveden,
then a residence of the Prince of Wales, in August 1740,

was revived as an oratorio in the 1750s, but originally con-
ceived as a masque.) As the editors of Musica Britannica
100 point out, Arne appears to have been encouraged
back to the oratorio by the death of Handel in 1759. *Judith*
was first performed at Drury Lane in February 1761, with
1.55 a second performance on 4 March; a third performance
was advertised but cancelled. There were revivals in sub-
sequent seasons, including a performance as part of David
Garrick's Shakespeare Jubilee of 1769. As a testament to
the comparative reception histories of Handel and Arne,
1.60 when the next major Shakespearean jubilee was staged, in
1864, Garrick's jubilee was looked to as a model, even to the
point of including an oratorio; however, it was not *Judith*
but *Messiah* that was performed. In truth Arne's *Judith* fell
out of the repertory shortly after his death, despite the best
1.65 efforts of his son, Michael, who with Francois Hippolyte
Barthelemon revived it for their 1784 oratorio season.

The oratorio tells the story of the titular Old Testament
character. Frustrated with her fellow Israelites for not
trusting in God to deliver their city of Bethulia from the
besieging Assyrian army, Judith infiltrates the enemy camp
and decapitates Holofernes, the Assyrian general, leading
to the salvation of Bethulia and the Israelites. The libretto
was written by Isaac Bickerstaff, who had also written
the libretto for *Thomas and Sally*. Bickerstaff avoided the
1.75 more gruesome aspects of the plot, with even the murder
of Holofernes taking place off-stage. Nevertheless, the edi-
tors note that while 'The choice of subject places the work
in a line of English oratorios celebrating female fortitude,
going back to Handel's *Esther* (revised 1732) and *Deborah*
1.80 (1733)' (pp.xxiii–xxiv), it was also a problematic story as it
had strong Catholic overtones, perhaps strengthening its
appeal to Arne: 'the widow Judith's cutting off the head of
Holofernes was a metaphor for Mary's chastity, giving the
story a powerful Marian message' (p.xxiv). Arne's setting
1.85 is quite remarkable, not least in his choruses, which are
forward-looking and demonstrate that he was perfectly
capable of ploughing his own furrow in the shadow of
Handelian oratorio; they make the more overt references
to Handel's weighty choruses in works such as *The Fairy*
Prince (1771) all the more forceful. The lyrical airs were
1.90 praised by contemporaries, including Dibdin and even
Charles Burney.

This is the fourth volume in the Musica Britannica
series to have been dedicated to Arne's music, along
1.95 with *Comus* (vol.3; 1951), *The Judgement of Paris* (vol.42;
1978) and *Alfred* (vol.47; 1981). The reason for this

2.5	comparatively poor representation is that many of Arne's large-scale works survive frustratingly incomplete. Few of his autograph manuscripts survive, most having perished (presumably) in the Covent Garden fire of 1808. Instead we mostly have to rely on printed versions, typically in vocal scores, which usually omit choruses and recitatives, making editorial reconstruction difficult. <i>Judith</i> is one of those rare exceptions where Arne's autograph full score survives: British Library, Add. Mss.11515–11517. The overture and airs were also published (by John Walsh) in 1761. Otherwise there is also an early 19th-century copy of the complete oratorio (London, Royal College of Music, Ms.738) and another copy—in the hand of Matthew Cooke—dated 1820 (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Tenbury 985). In addition, there are several printed librettos.	
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2.20	Fortunate as it is to have Arne's full score, the work presents an often complex challenge from an editorial perspective. The manuscript offers a fascinating glimpse into the composer's workshop, containing as it does a variety of revisions (crossed-out bars, changes to the text, alterations to vocal duties, and palimpsests). As the editors note, the status of the manuscript appears to have changed over time: it was presumably Arne's working compositional score, and then was used as the text for the performances in 1761 as well as for later revivals. Complicating matters is a revised ending for the duet 'Oh, thou, on whom the Weak depend' added by Samuel Arnold. (Arnold's public commemoration of Arne in 1802 also included several numbers from <i>Judith</i> .) The editorial challenge was by no means straightforward, then. As McVeigh and Lynan	
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	note: 'Our intention is to present <i>Judith</i> in a version as close to its original as possible, considering the state of the autograph score and the evidence of both the printed libretti and other musical sources, while acknowledging that the changing form of the eighteenth-century oratorio in fact precludes the presentation of a single definitive version' (p.xxxvi).	2.55
	The result is another exemplary addition to the Musica Britannica series. Handsomely bound and presented, it has been edited with impressive attention to detail and accuracy—as one expects from this august series. In the excellent introduction, the editors offer a detailed overview of the work, its sources and its reception. A detailed account of the performances (and casts) is also provided; an additional 'Summary of Performance History' is freely available at the publisher's website (www.musicabritannica.org.uk/volumes/mb100.html). The editorial principles are sensible; the commentary is clear, concise and easily accessible; the editors' decision to offer a separate commentary for the music and for the text was an excellent one, especially given the often complex nature of the revisions that were accumulated through the various performances.	2.60
		2.65
		2.70
	Given Arne's central, yet often overlooked, place in 18th-century British musical history, it is fitting that <i>Judith</i> should have been chosen for this landmark publication. As ever, Stainer and Bell offer offprints and performing parts. One only hopes, now that it is available in this excellent edition, that this great work will once again be heard.	2.75
		2.80
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		2.85
		2.90
		2.95
		2.100